

**Prepared Statement of Dr. John Clifford
Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

**Before the House Homeland Security Committee's
Hearing on Implementation of the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza
May 16, 2006**

Chairman King, Ranking Member Thompson, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee this afternoon. My name is Dr. John Clifford and I am the Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services with the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In this position, I also serve as USDA's Chief Veterinary Officer.

USDA appreciates your interest in our efforts to ensure that preparedness for a potential introduction of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus into the U.S. poultry population remains high. I also welcome the opportunity to provide you with information on our roles and responsibilities under the *Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza*.

National Implementation Plan for Pandemic Influenza

On May 3, 2006, President Bush announced his *Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza*. The focus of the *Implementation Plan* is to ensure that the efforts and resources of the Federal government are being brought to bear in a coordinated manner against the pandemic threat.

The *Implementation Plan* takes the major components of the President's *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* and breaks them down into more than 300 critical actions—many of which have already been initiated. The Plan directs involved Federal agencies to carry out these critical actions within prescribed amounts of time. The Plan is helping to ensure that the Federal government, along with our State and local partners and industry, continues to take appropriate steps in preparation for a possible influenza pandemic in the country.

I want to stress that this disease, first and foremost, continues to affect birds. However, we know it has caused acute illness in people who have had direct contact with sick or infected birds, with about half of these human cases resulting in death. We know that the virus, through mutation, could present a much greater risk to human health worldwide. So, there are both animal health and human health aspects of the Federal government's preparations.

As the President's *Implementation Plan* makes clear, these preparations are being closely coordinated among several departments, as well as with State and local governments and industry. USDA is the primary agency in terms of dealing with the

disease in poultry. The *Implementation Plan* directs USDA to play either a leadership or coordinating role in 98 critical actions. These include initiatives such as continuing our support of the coordinated efforts overseas to slow the spread of the disease in poultry and expanding our domestic surveillance and early warning systems while ensuring we have a strong plan in place to guide, along with our partners, the swift, decisive response to any eventual detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in poultry here in our country.

A few examples of USDA's critical actions under the *Implementation Plan* include:

- Supporting the testing of all broiler flocks in the United States for avian influenza and, more broadly, strengthening surveillance across the board for the disease in other segments of the poultry industry, as well as migratory birds.
- USDA's National Veterinary Stockpile is strategically storing "strike packs" containing personal protective equipment supplies designed to protect response personnel from influenza viruses. These strike packs can be deployed within 24 hours to the site of an outbreak in the United States.
- USDA recently posted to its avian influenza website a draft summary of the National Avian Influenza Response Plan. Once finalized, this plan will comprehensively guide the aggressive steps that will be taken by USDA and our State and industry partners following a detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in domestic poultry.
- Providing expertise and funding to assist the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) with a new Crisis Management Center to enhance the coordinated response to detections of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza worldwide. USDA training has been provided on incident command system structures, communications, and deployment procedures. We expect that the command center will be operational in the very near future.

I will touch more on these and other USDA critical actions in a few moments. But first I would like to stress that as we work to complete these efforts in the coming weeks and months, USDA will continue to use a four-pronged approach to combating avian influenza. First, we are focused on slowing the spread of this disease offshore by supporting other nations affected with this virus through robust support to the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza and by adopting a coordinated approach to work with affected countries through the FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). Second, we are conducting a proactive messaging campaign designed to educate the American public and poultry owners on this animal disease. We want to inform while not alarming. A third pillar of our doctrine is an aggressive surveillance program that focuses on four key areas: wild bird surveillance; commercial poultry operations; live bird markets; and backyard flocks. The fourth and final pillar of our doctrine is, when necessary, to execute our response and containment plans. USDA has a long and successful history of dealing with foreign animal diseases

and, in particular, handling avian influenza. These successful efforts are due in large part to the high degree of cooperation we have undertaken with our State animal health colleagues, industry, and other Federal agencies.

I want to emphasize to the Committee that in taking this multi-faceted approach, we are not waiting for the virus to reach our shores before we begin coordinating our preparedness and response efforts with our partners. We know that the threat is real and that the virus could potentially arrive in our country via migratory birds. Therefore, many important planning and coordination efforts are already well underway. Our strategy, again, is that we are preparing as if the virus will reach U.S. poultry, while taking measures where possible to slow its spread overseas and, where and when we can, prevent its entry through pathways that we can address. I believe this approach is the right one to take, and will pay off greatly in the event this highly pathogenic H5N1, or another serious avian influenza virus, reaches our country.

Summary of Pandemic Influenza Supplemental Funding for USDA

Last December, Congress approved, and President Bush signed into law, an emergency supplemental funding bill for pandemic influenza preparedness that included \$91.35 million for USDA. Since that time, we have been working expeditiously to ensure that our plans for using these funds are strategically sound and fully coordinated with our many international, Federal, State, local, and industry cooperators. We have taken these responsibilities so seriously, in fact, that we have utilized USDA's and APHIS' emergency operations centers to coordinate our efforts. Our animal health officials have also worked under an incident command structure to maximize their communications, planning, and logistical capabilities.

Let me quickly summarize the international and domestic initiatives funded by supplemental appropriations, all of which are also included as critical actions in the *Implementation Plan*.

On the international front, we are using approximately \$20 million to help affected countries overseas in collaboration with international organizations. Again, we are participating in a coordinated effort by the various interested U.S. Government agencies, led by the Department of State, to work with affected countries through the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).

We have developed a coordinated approach to work with affected countries through the FAO and the OIE. This plan calls for the OIE to lead and coordinate robust, consistent assessments of veterinary service capacity in developing countries reporting cases of the H5N1 virus. This would also entail evaluating H5N1 eradication and control plans in affected and at-risk countries. These assessments will form the basis for carefully planned attempts to improve animal health services capacity, using a range of support mechanisms including international financial assistance and technical and other support from the private and public sectors. Countries, like the United States, with proven expertise in these areas would also provide personnel for assessment teams that

will travel to countries and provide on-the-ground recommendations and assistance. Then, ultimately, a prioritized list of needs for specific regions of the world would be produced to further direct program coordination and resources to the most at-risk areas. The FAO will coordinate these infrastructure improvements efforts globally, regionally, and in affected countries with local authorities.

On the domestic front, we are utilizing approximately \$72 million from the emergency supplemental appropriation, in part, to:

- Enhance smuggling interdiction and trade compliance (\$9 million);
- Continue research and development of improved tools like vaccines, genome sequencing; environmental surveillance and biosecurity measures (\$7 million);
- Enhance surveillance of wildlife/bird flyways (\$18 million);
- Strengthen other domestic surveillance and diagnostics (about \$18 million);
- Increase the current animal vaccine stockpile and stock other response supplies (\$10 million);
- Enhance planning, equipment, and preparedness training, and the development of simulation models (\$9 million); and
- Improve a variety of other preparedness activities (\$1 million)

USDA has been engaged in avian influenza response efforts for decades. We have much real-world experience dealing with the disease—both the low pathogenic and highly pathogenic forms. Based on that experience, we are focusing our resources where they are most needed.

Surveillance and Detection

A 1983 outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza was the largest incident of the disease in this country, ultimately resulting in the destruction of 17 million birds in Pennsylvania and Virginia to eradicate the virus. By contrast, a 2004 outbreak in Texas was quickly isolated to a flock of 6,600 birds and eradicated.

The disease detection in Texas underscores just how critical effective biosecurity measures, stringent surveillance, timely reporting, and swift control, eradication, and disinfection are to an effective emergency response. We are striving to bolster all of these capabilities through our plan for using the emergency supplemental funding, as well as by meeting our requirements under the Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan.

I believe we are in an excellent position to accomplish this goal today because of the partnerships we have forged with State animal health officials and the poultry industry over the years. Several programs are helping to foster close relations with States and industry. One of them is the longstanding National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP), a cooperative Federal-State-industry program designed to enhance the health and marketability of commercial U.S. poultry. The other is our new low-pathogenic avian influenza program, designed to increase surveillance efforts for the low-pathogenic H5 and H7 strains of the disease in commercial flocks and the live bird marketing system. These strains, if left unaddressed, have the potential to mutate into a more virulent

disease. Both of these programs are serving as springboards as we enhance surveillance efforts, enter into additional cooperative agreements with States, and tighten our emergency response plans.

We are using approximately \$5.9 million for the NPIP cooperative effort to enhance the testing of commercial flocks—broilers, layers, turkeys, and their respective breeding flocks—for avian influenza viruses of concern. The supplemental also includes \$2.9 million for surveillance by USDA's National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL). This funding will allow NVSL to provide support to approved laboratories for the processing of samples. This includes all segments of the surveillance program for H5N1, including samples collected from wildlife, commercial poultry, and the live bird marketing system in the United States.

This funding will also allow NVSL to develop and contract out the production of agar gel immunodiffusion (AGID) testing reagents to be distributed at no charge to laboratories approved to participate in the surveillance effort. In this way, we will meet the poultry industry's desire to test all broiler flocks in the United States for avian influenza and, more broadly, surveillance across the board will be strengthened.

Migratory Bird Surveillance

Another area where we have taken steps to obtain better information regarding any potential disease threat to U.S. poultry is migratory bird surveillance. Wild birds, in particular certain species of waterfowl and shorebirds, are considered to be the natural reservoirs for many common, relatively harmless strains of avian influenza. We also know that migratory birds have been implicated, to some degree, in the spread of the disease overseas.

On March 20, 2006, the Departments of Agriculture, the Interior, and Health and Human Services released an inter-agency strategic plan that expands the monitoring of migratory birds in the United States for the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus and establishes common protocols for testing birds and tracking the data.

"An Early Detection System for H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Wild Migratory Birds -- U.S. Interagency Strategic Plan" reflects the best possible scientific information on the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus and the migratory patterns of wild birds. In addition, the plan draws on ongoing partnerships with State and private wildlife experts, animal health experts, as well as public health officials.

The plan targets bird species in North America that have the highest risk of being exposed to, or infected with, highly pathogenic H5N1 because of their migratory movement patterns. Key species of interest include ducks, geese, and shorebirds.

Personnel from USDA, Department of the Interior, State wildlife agencies, and other cooperators will work closely to obtain samples and test them for avian influenza viruses of concern.

Under the new enhanced surveillance program for migratory birds, APHIS officials began sampling efforts in Alaska in late April. I would note here that between 1998 and 2005, USDA's Agricultural Research Service and the University of Alaska partnered to test some 12,000 samples taken from wild migratory birds in Alaska for avian influenza viruses of concern. All these samples were negative for these viruses of concern to us.

In other areas under the enhanced migratory bird surveillance plan, APHIS has also begun sampling Eastern wild turkeys in collaboration with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. And just last week, our National Wildlife Research Center began processing environmental water and fecal samples collected from areas of Alaska that harbor high-risk waterfowl and shorebirds. Other states will begin collecting similar high-risk environmental samples in June based on migration patterns.

Import Restrictions and Anti-Smuggling Efforts

There are other important efforts USDA has employed to keep the H5N1 virus and others out of the United States. As a primary safeguard, APHIS maintains trade restrictions on the importation of live poultry, birds, and unprocessed poultry products from all affected countries. Heat-treated poultry meat and eggs from countries with highly pathogenic avian influenza are considered eligible for importation from countries with equivalent meat inspection systems. Imports of live birds, poultry and unprocessed poultry products may resume after APHIS has completed a regionalization analysis that identifies the entire country or zone within the affected-country as disease-free. Import permits must accompany properly sanitized products, such as feathers.

APHIS' Smuggling, Interdiction, and Trade Compliance (SITC) teams, as well as our colleagues with the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection, have been alerted and are vigilantly on the lookout for any poultry or poultry products that might be smuggled into the United States from any of the affected countries. In the coming weeks, APHIS port veterinarians will make presentations to CBP officials at numerous high-traffic U.S. ports of entry to ensure that inspectors are reminded of the protocols for handling live birds they intercept, as well as have accurate contact information for any related questions or concerns. Additionally, USDA quarantines and tests imported live birds from countries (excluding Canada) not known to have cases of infection to make sure that pet birds and other fowl do not inadvertently introduce disease into the United States.

I'd like to point out that APHIS' SITC program is responsible for intelligence gathering and other anti-smuggling activities, such as secondary market and warehouse inspections, that help prevent animal and plant pests and diseases from entering the United States. As I said, SITC has increased its targeting of illegal shipments of birds or bird products that could potentially carry the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus, as well as its partnering with other Federal agencies and law enforcement personnel. Thus far in fiscal year 2006, SITC has already contributed to 63 separate seizures of prohibited products from countries reporting detections of the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus. These seizures total more than 135,000 pounds of prohibited

poultry products that, again, could pose a risk of harboring the H5N1 virus, or other serious poultry diseases.

The Draft National Avian Influenza Response Plan

Now that I have touched on our plans to slow the spread of the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus overseas, exclude its entry into the United States through trade restrictions and anti-smuggling programs, and bolster domestic surveillance, I'd like to update you on our plans for responding to a detection of any highly pathogenic avian influenza in commercial poultry.

Again, our ability to respond swiftly is linked directly to the strong cooperative efforts APHIS is engaged in with States and industry relative to avian influenza. The U.S. Poultry and Egg Association convened an industry-wide meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 27, to facilitate dialogue with State and USDA officials regarding the many operational, policy, and communications issues related to our cooperative avian influenza preparedness efforts. Many of APHIS' senior animal health staff attended the meeting, which was, I believe, extremely beneficial to all who attended.

Prior to the poultry industry meeting in Atlanta, APHIS posted to its website a draft summary of the National Avian Influenza Response Plan. This draft response plan supports one of USDA's major mandates in the President's *Implementation Plan*—the control and eradication of an introduction into the United States of highly pathogenic avian influenza.

The draft response plan would guide the steps taken by USDA and our State and industry partners following a detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in domestic poultry. It reflects USDA's scientific expertise on highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses, as well as our real world experience in planning for, and responding to, incursions of significant animal diseases into the United States.

In addition, the plan draws on our ongoing partnerships with other Federal agencies, State Agriculture Departments, State Veterinarians, the poultry industry, and the conservation and wildlife communities. In this way, the plan is designed to be flexible and does not supersede any State response plans. Rather, it complements such plans already in existence, or under development.

As a result of tabletop exercises and numerous meetings and discussions with our partners, the response plan incorporates much positive feedback. In releasing a summary of the draft document and posting it online, we fully expect further review and comment by stakeholders. In this way, we intend for the response plan to be an evolving document that takes into account the latest scientific information and approaches to emergency preparedness and response.

Let me elaborate a bit further on the Response Plan. USDA has in place a robust emergency response program designed to complement all of our surveillance efforts. When we have unexpected poultry, or for that matter livestock, illnesses or deaths on a

farm, we immediately conduct a foreign animal disease investigation. We have a cadre of specially trained veterinarians who can be on site within four hours to conduct an initial examination and submit samples for additional laboratory testing. Also, the Departments of Health and Human Services and Labor are providing occupational health guidance on the use of personal protective equipment and antiviral prophylaxis treatments to USDA and other departments that have personnel in direct contact with live infected or dead poultry.

In conjunction with our State colleagues, APHIS maintains State-level emergency response teams on standby. These teams will typically be on site within 24 hours of the initial examination and diagnosis of a presumptive diagnosis of avian influenza or any other significant foreign animal disease. Destruction of the affected flocks would be our primary concern and course of action. We would also work with States or tribes to possibly impose State-level quarantines and movement restrictions.

For highly pathogenic avian influenza as well as for low pathogenic H5 and H7 subtypes, the Response Plan provides guidelines as to how APHIS would work with States to quarantine affected premises and clean and disinfect those premises after the birds have been depopulated and disposed. Surveillance testing would also be conducted in the quarantine zone and surrounding area to ensure that the virus has been completely eradicated.

I would like to note here that APHIS also maintains a bank of avian influenza vaccines for animals in the event that the vaccine would be a potential course of action in any outbreak situation. Funding included in the emergency request will augment the current animal vaccine bank by an additional 40 million doses. This expansion of the animal vaccine bank to approximately 100 million doses of avian influenza vaccine will be critical in the event of a large-scale avian influenza situation in the United States.

I need to stress here, however, that wide-scale vaccination of poultry is not our primary strategy against avian influenza. Rather, poultry vaccination could be used in response to widespread detection of the disease in the United States to create barriers against further spread and assist with our overall control and eradication measures. The Response Plan's focus, first and foremost, is on quickly containing and eradicating this virus before it has the chance to spread further in the poultry population.

Communications

I also want to emphasize that for the last several years APHIS has conducted a major outreach campaign called "Biosecurity for the Birds." The campaign places informational materials directly into the hands of commercial poultry producers, as well as those raising poultry in their backyards. All of the brochures and fact sheets are available in several languages and emphasize the need for good biosecurity and disease surveillance programs to reduce the possibility of bringing any disease, not just avian influenza, on the farm or into their backyard. The campaign also encourages producers to report sick birds, thereby increasing surveillance opportunities for avian influenza.

We also recognize that an essential part of a successful emergency response program is effective communication with the media and the public. This is especially important given the concern right now regarding avian influenza and potential risks to human health. To be prepared in the event of a detection, USDA has been coordinating closely with its counterparts at other Federal agencies, State Agriculture Departments, and industry organizations to ensure, when the time comes, consistent messages regarding the strain of the disease found, the steps being taken in response, and the potential effects to poultry and, if appropriate, human health. USDA officials have also participated in numerous government-wide tabletop exercises with a focus on avian influenza. Coordination will be vital to our ability to deliver important information, while maintaining public confidence in, among other things, the food supply and public health system. Our draft National Avian Influenza Response Plan includes a detailed communications plan that will guide our efforts in these areas.

Conclusion

Allow me to close by offering a couple of thoughts that I believe are absolutely central to our discussion today. These points are also a critical part of understanding the broader context in which I believe avian influenza should be viewed.

First, just like in people, there are many strains of influenza that affect birds, with varying degrees of impact and importance.

Second, a detection of the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus circulating overseas in birds here in the United States does not signal the start of a human pandemic. This virus is not easily transmitted from person to person. As I said, almost all of the human illnesses overseas were the result of direct contact with sick or dead birds.

Third, a detection in wild birds does not mean the virus will reach a commercial poultry operation. We are certainly preparing as if it will, but the U.S. poultry industry employs a very sophisticated system of firewalls to protect the safety of their product. In addition, the wild migratory bird surveillance plan is serving as an early warning system for commercial poultry operations.

Fourth, even if the virus reaches a commercial poultry operation, there is no reason for consumers to be concerned about the safety of the poultry that they purchase and eat, as long as the poultry is properly handled and cooked. Again, I believe that our state of readiness for a detection in commercial poultry is high, and our Response Plan would guide a swift, comprehensive response designed to minimize further spread of the disease.

Finally, I want to stress again that when it comes to food safety, consumers have the power to protect themselves. Proper handling and cooking of poultry, quite simply, kills this virus and other food-borne pathogens. Properly prepared poultry is safe. To reinforce this message in the event of an outbreak in domestic poultry, the Federal government will provide supplemental guidance on food preparation and public health protection through a robust communications plan.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. I will be happy to answer your questions.